

TESTIMONY

of

**Richard Jones
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before the

**Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives**

on

The Independent Budget

and

**The Department of Veterans' Affairs Budget
for Fiscal Year 2003**

**Tuesday, February 13, 2002, 10:00 AM
334 Cannon House Office Building**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Evans, and members of the Committee:

AMVETS is honored to join fellow veterans service organizations in providing you our best estimates on the resources necessary to carry out a responsible budget for the fiscal year 2003 programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

AMVETS—a leader since 1944 in preserving the freedoms secured by America’s Armed Forces—provides, not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements, but also community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation’s citizens.

AMVETS testifies before you today as a co-author of *The Independent Budget*. For over 16 years AMVETS has worked with the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars to produce a working document that sets out our spending recommendations on veterans' programs for the new fiscal year. Besides working with our coauthors on the overall development and publication of *The Independent Budget*, AMVETS’ primary focus is on developing the recommendations for funding the National Cemetery Administration in the new year.

Before I address budget recommendations for the National Cemetery Administration, I would like to say that AMVETS fully appreciates the strong leadership and continuing support demonstrated by the House Veterans Affairs Committee. AMVETS is truly grateful to the members who serve on this important committee. Clearly, your achievements in the first session of this Congress demonstrate you have at heart the best interests of veterans and their families. You have distinguished yourselves as willing to work in a bipartisan manner to address numerous issues of great importance to the Nation’s veterans.

Since its establishment, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has provided the highest standards of service to veterans and eligible family members in the system’s 120 national cemeteries in 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. A year ago, NCA opened cemeteries in Chicago, IL; Albany, NY; Cleveland, OH; and Dallas, TX. Late last year, fast-track operations were started at Ft. Sill, OK, and Atlanta, GA. And development will continue, with adequate funding for design and construction, for future facilities in Miami, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Sacramento.

While the National Cemetery Administration maintains more than 2.5 million gravesites on nearly 14,000 acres of cemetery land, there remains a need to establish additional national cemeteries in some critically needed areas. AMVETS supports the Committee's active review of this matter and its continued encouragement of the Administration to meet the growing demand for space. Clearly, without the strong commitment of Congress and its authorizing and appropriations committees, VA would likely fall short of burial space for millions of veterans and their eligible dependents.

The members of *The Independent Budget* recommend that Congress provide \$138 million and 1,525 full time employees for the operational requirements of NCA in fiscal year 2003. This is an increase of \$17 million and 65 FTE over the 2002 current estimate level.

Currently, the NCA provides more than 83,000 interments annually, an eight percent jump over last year. The aging veteran population has created great demands on NCA operations and actuarial projections do not suggest a decline in these demands for many years. To ensure that the burial needs of veterans and eligible family members are met, the IBVSOs believe the budget must be increased to provide new staff and equipment improvements. Maintaining quality service with an accelerating workload will require additional resources. \$138 million for the NCA will provide the additional full-time employees and necessary supplies and equipment for grounds maintenance and program operations.

For funding the State Cemetery Grants Program, the members of *The Independent Budget* recommend \$32 million for the new fiscal year. The State Cemetery Grants Program works in complement with the NCA to establish gravesites for veterans in those areas where NCA cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. The enactment of the Veterans Programs Enhancement Act of 1998 has made this program very active and attractive to the states. At the start of the current year, there were 10 new cemeteries under design and 11 new cemeteries in planning. There are also scheduled fast-track openings in central Indiana, northern Wisconsin, Arkansas, Massachusetts, Maine, and Montana. Through the State Grants Program, NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the planning, design, and construction of an approved new cemetery.

To properly support veterans who desire burial in state facilities, members of *The Independent Budget* support increasing the plot allowance to \$670 from the current level of \$300. The plot allowance now covers only 6 percent of funeral costs. Increasing the burial benefit to \$670 would make the amount proportionally equal to the benefit paid in 1973. In addition, we firmly believe the plot allowance should be extended to all veterans who are eligible for burial in a national cemetery not solely those who served in wartime.

The IBVSOs also request Congress review a series of burial benefits that have seriously eroded in value over the years. While these benefits were never intended to cover the full costs of burial, they now pay for only a fraction of what they covered in 1973, when they were initiated.

The IBVSOs recommend an increase in the service-connected benefits from \$2,000 to \$3,700. Prior to action in the last session of Congress, increasing the amount \$500, the benefit had been untouched since 1988. The request would restore the allowance to its original proportion of burial expense.

The IBVSOs recommend increasing the nonservice-connected benefit from \$300 to \$1,135, bringing it back up to its original 22 percent coverage of funeral costs. This benefit was last adjusted in 1978, and today covers just 6 percent of burial expenses.

The IBVSOs recommend changing current law to provide a headstone to mark the grave of all honorably discharged veterans upon request of the family. The current code, allowing a headstone only for unmarked graves, causes unnecessary confusion and unsettling aggravation to the families who see VA headstones at nearby marked sites and cannot understand why their loved one cannot likewise be distinguished. Providing a headstone is a small price to pay for commemorating the service of a veteran to our Nation.

The IBVSOs also recommend that Congress enact legislation to index these burial benefits for inflation to avoid their future erosion.

Finally, the IBVSOs note that the National Cemetery Administration's greatest challenge is yet ahead. Based on statistics projecting a dramatic increase in the interment rate until 2010, members of *The Independent Budget* recommend that the National Cemetery Administration establish a strategic plan for the period 2003 to 2008. We must plan for a truly national system, and it must have congressional and administrative budgetary support. We call on Congress to make funds available for planning and fast-track construction of needed national cemeteries.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I thank you again for the privilege to present our views, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.